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Letter from John E. Fletcher to Ruth [Fletecher] 1850 June 20, 21, 22, 24, 25 and July 4

John E. Fletcher

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Little Deer Creek 2 miles from Nevada City, June 20, 1850

Dear Ruth,

I will send you a slip if nothing more for I believe that you must be anxious to hear from me as often as possible. I am fated to have something the matter with me nearly all the time. I have got poisoned most abominably and have been laid up three days and shall probably be as much longer before I can go to work. My face is swelled so I can scarcely see and both arms are a running sore from the wrists to the elbows, so you may judge whether it is an easy matter for me to write. I have been at work in this neighborhood a month and I was getting a good start when I got into this scrape. I have found Daniel. He is at work close by but is not making a great deal yet. He has been very unfortunate since Josiah left him. When I first found him, he was just recovering from a fever and was in debt for his expenses while sick, but he has got to work again and about cleared himself. I have paid out over seventy dollars for mining tools, etc, and have got six ounces of gold dust left yet, so I consider myself well off. It is a hard case to get a fortune out of California, for everyone who goes home with his pile there are six who find their graves here. Five acquaintances of mine have died here since I landed at San Francisco. I have not got discouraged, but if I can get hold of enough to insure my getting home with six hundred dollars, I shall strike a line for Lowell in a hurry. I know a large number of men who have been here a year and are in debt now. It is the easiest thing in the world to get into debt here. My credit was never so good. A man offered to trust me yesterday for five hundred dollars, but I pay as I go and shall until I get hungry and have no money. I can write no more at present, for I have to hold my arms up and it makes them ache.

Saturday, June 21st

I am a little better today but not so much as I was in hopes of

being. I went down town this forenoon and it was all I could do to get home again. I wish I could give you a description of the mining country that would convey a correct idea of it. The hills look a great deal like loaves of leaven bread of different sizes and shapes all tumbled together. The smaller ones and the ravines and the lower parts of the larger ones are covered with the largest trees I ever saw. I paced off the length of one that was blown down and it measured one hundred and five paces in length and I could not see a man as tall as myself on the other side of it. If I could have a hundred acres of the woodland I have seen here anywhere within fifty miles of Boston, I should be the richest man in the state. The woods are very open with no bushes except close to the streams and the ground is covered with grass, wild oats, peas and barley, and the most beautiful flowers you ever saw. I shall try to save some seeds to carry home. I have slept in a tent two or three times within a month and the rest of the time under a tree. My blankets and quilt got afire and burned up half of each blanket and burnt the quilt so full of holes that I had to take one half of it to mend the other with, then sewed the blankets together and made one decent one of them. The nights are very cold here and I suffer a great deal from the cold nights and full as much from the heat, days.

Sunday morning, the 22nd

Better this morning though my feet are very sore yet. You can't imagine how it takes of the money to be idle here. Even smoking costs so much that I am almost tempted to leave it off. I wish I could have a table to write from. If you want to know some of the inconveniences of writing, just go out into the woods where the mosquitoes are thick and sit down on the ground with your back to a tree on which big black ants are swarming and take a ^{tin?} time pan for a writing desk and you will know how to appreciate my letters from the mines. It costs me two dollars besides the postage for letters I get here and I shall have to

give a dollar to send this down to San Francisco. I have received no letter from you since the one of March 7th, which I received in San Francisco. The express comes up sometime this week and I am in hopes of getting a good long one from you. I have written to Josiah and intend to put this into it. Dan is going to write some in Josiah's. He sends his best wishes to you and your mother and Marian and Bradshaw. Tell Marian if she will write a sheet to put into your next letter for me, I will send her a specimen of Yuba Gold in answer to it. Tell her that Isaac was very much liked and respected by the acquaintances he made here and that he had everything done for him which money could buy or friendship give. Dan spent over three hundred dollars for him and did everything in his power to make him comfortable. I shall send you some money as soon as I can spare any with safety to myself, for I know you had rather work than have me sick here without the means of helping myself. There are some diseases here which the only cure for is to leave the country. If a poor fellow without money gets them he lingers on a few months until he exhausts the pity and generosity of those around him and he dies from want and neglect. If I get anything on me which does not yield to medicine properly administered, I shall start for home as soon as possible. Don't think I am getting homesick, for much as I wish to see you I shall never leave this country with health and without money enough to at least give us a start in the world. Tell the Major he had better let out on the railroad as a laborer than come here. Tell him that I see men every day making their fortunes, but I see five times as many more working twice as hard to keep from starving. A man offered me ten dollars to go for a doctor to come and see him. I went for nothing but the doctor would not go to see him although I offered him a hundred dollars for one visit. He gave me some medicine for him and charged twenty-five dollars for it which I paid. The man has got well now though and is at work.

Sunday afternoon

I am at the camp all alone, for all hands have gone down town. I must give you some description of Nevada City, as it is called, for there is a great many such cities in California. The town has actually got a street in it (though to be sure it is crooked and not very safe for the ox carts which occasionally pass through it). The street if straightened out would be almost as long as the Carpet Block. The houses are either made of canvas or of cedar boards split out instead of sawed and put on rough in the same way clapboards are at home. There are five round tents as large almost as a circus tent occupied entirely as gambling shops and nine out of every ten doors on the street open the way to a liquor bar. There are several tents, camps, and cabins scattered around in the woods. Such is the City of Nevada. There is no post office, but there are express men who make it their business to go down below after letters. They charge two dollars a letter and the postage.

Tuesday, the 24th

I have not been to work yet, but Dan and his partner and myself went out to prospect a ravine I had seen below here on my way up. We could not do anything that would pay, although we found water and gold in it. The ground was so hard to dig that we could not make over five dollars a day. Dan is out of work again, but if he can't get diggings, he will let out as I do. If I had a good partner, I should not work out, for we could make wages if nothing more by working for ourselves, but I don't happen to come across anyone I like well enough to go partners with him. Dan's partner is a relation of the all sorts man of ~~last river and some like him.~~ I am expecting a letter from you every day by the express, and if it is not a good long one, three sheets at

least you may imagine yourself getting a Scotch blessing for your

laziness or indifference, I shan't know which to lay it to. I shall expect to hear in it that you have received my Valparaiso letter and that you have heard of our arrival in San Francisco. I have heard of John Dawse at last. He and Alph and Dillingham will never do anything her^e, but they may do the best of anyone in the whole country for all that. All depends upon luck. A greenhorn will sometimes strike a lead worth five thousand dollars right in the middle of a spot that has been prospected by old miners. I saw a small claim that a man found before he had been in the mines a week. Sold for fourteen thousand dollars. What do you think of that? If I find such a spot and get a chance to sell it, you will see me in about six weeks after. It is hot enough to melt tallow candles and last night I woke up two or three times I said so cold. There is snow within fifteen miles of here deep enough to cover the tallest trees in some places and it will stay all summer in some places. This letter will be very dirty, but I can't help it. I have taken a great deal of pains to keep it clean and write it plain, but my ink and pen are very poor and a camp is not quite so neat as a parlor. I can't write a separate sheet to father and mother, so you must read as much of this as you think will be their share to them. I would not be hired to write letters here for twenty dollars apiece. It is quite a serious job to write one and if I write to them, I can't to you, so they must excuse me if I don't write a letter all to themselves. I expect to get a letter from Laura soon for I have not had one from her since I have been out here and I sent her a long one from San Francisco. I was much pleased with the Major's letter, for I hardly thought he could accomplish such a long one. I shall try hard to make something this summer so that I can come home in the fall but if I do not, I shall go down below and perhaps send for you, for fortunes can be made here in the next few years at almost any of the mechanical arts or at farming and the country would be quite endurable if a man could only surround himself with some of the comforts of home. I like the climate as well as that of our own state,

for the cold nights are no worse than the east winds of Boston. I reckon there would be some blue faces in Lowell if you were obliged to take out your windows and chimneys and do your cooking at fires in the street during a northeast storm even in June and there are very few in this country who are as well off as you would be.

Wednesday, the 25th

I am still idle for my feet are very bad. I blistered them going out with Dan Monday and I can't get my boots on. Boots sell at twenty-five dollars a pair here and I must get a pair soon, for mine are almost worn out. I have bought nothing but a straw hat since I have been in this country so far but I shall have to get a couple of shirts and a jacket and a pair of pants which with the boots will cost sixty dollars. Dan has promised to give me a pair of blankets, but I should not take them if I had not done as much for him, for I don't like the idea of laying myself under any obligations to him not even to eat a meal of victuals at his camp. He has bought a claim with his partner on credit and I hope he will do well with it. It is at the Loyola diggings near Nevada which have proved as rich as any in the country. Dan had a visitor at his camp two nights in succession which carried off his salt pork and tore up his sack of flour, but the third night when a party armed with rifles were waiting to receive him, he didn't come and he has not been seen but once since and that was a week ago. It was a grizzly bear, pleasant neighbors, very. I have killed several rattlesnakes since I have been here. I found one very snugly coiled up under my clothes bag not a yard from my head one morning. I have got about tired of writing but I don't know when I shall send this, so I will leave it open.

4th of July

I have kept this letter open hoping to get letters from you before

I sent it, but the express has got up and there is no letter for me. The last letter I received from you was dated the 7th of March, four months ago and it will be three months before I can get another chance to get letters for I start tomorrow for the north fork of the North Yuba. I think it quite likely I shall stay there until November. If I do, it will make eight months without hearing from you. I am out of humor and the sight of the happy faces of those who did get letters has not made me feel any better. I have a good mind to light my pipe with this and I think I should if I did not want to show you how much pains I take to write to you. I have got well of my poison but I have had five boils, comforters by way of variety to my afflictions, but they have got almost well and I don't know what will come next. Dan is here yet but thinks he shall go up where I am going soon. I must do up my washing today so as to be ready for a start. I am fat, ragged, and saucy, wear nothing but a blue shirt, pants, and boots, and hat. If I am fortunate enough to strike a lead up there on the north fork, you will see me before you get another letter from me, for all those best acquainted with the country say the next winter will be the worst ever known here. Give my love to all friends and write a long letter every week and put it in the office, mail or no mail. Hurrah for the Fourth of July.

Yours ever,

John E. Fletcher